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One In 25 Online Youth Asked To Send Sexual Pictures Of Themselves

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EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Researchers Kimberly Mitchell and David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center, are available to speak to reporters in advance of the publication of the journal article. Mitchell can be reached at 603-862-4533 and Kimberly.Mitchell@unh.edu. Finkelhor can be reached at 603-862-2761, 603-767-1010 (cell) and david.finkelhor@unh.edu.

DURHAM, N.H. -- One in 25 youth who use the Internet got a request to transmit a sexual picture of themselves during the course of the year, according to a new study published Friday, July 20, 2007, in the Journal of Adolescent Health.

This development represents a new peril for young people created by the fusion of digital photography and the Internet, say the authors of the study, researchers at the University of New Hampshire's Crimes against Children Research Center.

The article, "Online Requests for Sexual Pictures from Youth: Risk Factors and Incident Characteristics", is co-authored by Mitchell; David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children research Center; and Janis Wolak, a researcher at the center.

According to the study, very few of those surveyed actually complied with the requests, but given the millions of youth online, thousands of children may potentially be sending such pictures.

"We think most children don't fully understand the stakes here," said Mitchell, lead author of the study. "They may just see it as rudeness or sometimes even flattery. But the making and sending of these pictures, even by youth themselves, constitutes the production and transmission of child pornography, a serious felony offense."

"Youth who might send such private pictures to boyfriends or girlfriends may not recognize how easily such pictures can be launched into the infinite and irrevocable circulation of cyberspace," she said.

The research was based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,500 youth Internet users ages 10 to 17.

One concerning finding from the study was that a group at particularly high risk to receive such requests for pictures were victims of previous physical and sexual abuse. "Because of emotional problems, these youth may be particularly vulnerable to such requests," Mitchell

said.

The authors suggest that it is important to quickly educate youth about the dangers of these sexual picture requests. They need to understand the criminal nature of the requests and the serious pathology that may characterize those doing the requesting. The youth need to be encouraged to make reports about such requests to service providers and the Cybertipline (www.cybertipline.com), a national hotline to investigate people who may be trying to exploit children.

